



Kaleidoscope

Volume 1

Article 7

2002

A Very Small Ledge: A Personal Reflection

Jessica Couch
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kaleidoscope>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Couch, Jessica (2002) "A Very Small Ledge: A Personal Reflection," *Kaleidoscope*: Vol. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/vol1/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Office of Undergraduate Research at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kaleidoscope by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

Jessica Couch

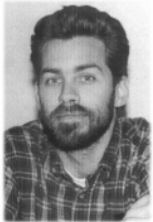


I am a junior English major and Women's Studies minor. For the three semesters that I have been at UK, I have been on the Dean's List with a 4.0 average. Also, I just received a \$1000 merit scholarship from the College of Arts and Sciences.

In this personal essay, "A Very Small Ledge," I reflect upon the alcoholism prevalent in my closest relatives, while also examining my own drinking habits. I juxtapose anecdotes of family members with my own experiences of alcohol. In the end, I conclude that my family's habits, however detrimental, do not curb my own. In this self examination, I realize that I choose to live on a very small ledge.

In the future, I hope to become a professor of both English and Women's Studies. As writing is one of my great loves — a love that I hope to share with my students one day — I find my personal reflections, such as this submission, a passionate yet necessary medium for my advancement. For this piece, I was forced to objectively analyze my family's use of alcohol as well as my own. Such honesty was greatly encouraged by my mentor, Erik Reece.

When I'm not writing or doing homework, I'm usually working. I work at a private company called "Patient Advocates" that helps find medication for people in Kentucky who otherwise could not afford it. Fortunately, it's a job that is both rewarding and fun.



Mentor:
Erik Reece,
Lecturer,
Department
of English

How many writers who come from a family of congenital alcoholism can face up to that brutal lineage — and face it down — with skill, honesty, and courage? Jessica Couch can. "A Very Small Ledge" is a collection of searing, unflinching portraits of a parent, grandparents, and uncles whose lives were hollowed out and ultimately cut short by alcohol. But be forewarned: this is not a morality tale. Jessica is looking for the truth; she isn't satisfied with easy answers or neat summations. That, after all, is not the essayist's job. Between each family portrait, Jessica turns the camera on herself to examine a complex series of events that lead to her own "very small ledge." From there, she must stave off her family's demons — even as she beckons them toward her. As the writing instructor who watched this piece develop, where would I rank it? Right beside Pete Hamill's *The Drinking Life*, Scott Russell Sanders' "Under the Influence," and Robert Stone's "Helping." Jessica brings poetry to a subject that could not sustain itself without that healing voice.

A Very Small Ledge

A Personal Reflection

Somewhere, spiraling in the tightened coils of my genetic code, a hidden culprit attaches with inexorable force to my x chromosomes like a rabid dog to a helpless child — the dominantly diseased inheritance of German and Swedish stock. This entity resides in each cell of my body, resting quietly and waiting for the ambush during that lowest valley of human emotion, the most stressful of deadlines, or any mundane moments of a long workweek. This being preys on its victim like a sucking parasite on the intestinal wall, extracting personality and nutrients until the real person only flickers in between red eyes and belligerent rantings. The person *becomes* this being, feeding it, nurturing this whining child and its insatiable belly. More. More. More. Unable and unwilling to realize the loss of will, the person, marked by a parched tongue and unseen driving force, looks into the fridge, the pantry, the linen closet, the marble top bar, and even the spice cabinet. Wherever it can be found, the main ingredient is constant: alcohol, the purer, the better.

Most people know where they come from by their connections with a region of the world, a warm home, and close relatives. For me, the story of my ancestors, my relatives, where I come from, and where I might end up is in my blood. My blood faintly whispers the family secrets of weak fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, and uncles so thirsty they would give their career, their life savings, and even the love of their family for just a drop of sweet oak bourbon, the froth of a dark beer, or the olive at the bottom of a dirty martini. No, that's not right. They'd settle for the worst beer, the cheapest vodka . . . even cooking sherry. Their quivering hands fumbling through the cabinets of the house for that drop, that fix, that smooth buzz, they sought a liquid filler for a void that wasn't just in their stomach but in their minds.

I remember the first time alcohol touched my lips. Spending my usual weekend at the house of my friend, Sarah, we sat on the barstools next to the kitchen counter, while her mother, Pam, concocted the makings of strawberry daiquiris. Carefully slicing fresh strawberries that a migrant farm worker from up the road gave her, she added the juicy halves with the margarita mix we bought at Ralph's and placed them into the glass blender. She added ice. Waiting for all the ice to grind down into a smooth puree, we awkwardly danced to Mariah Carey's "Dreamlover," the version with Old Dirty Bastard. We all sang, "Me and Mariah, go back like babies and pacifiers." We laughed. Three white girls with no rhythm.

I remember thinking how cool Pam was, shaking her big booty on the light brown wood floors of her always-fun house. The daiquiris were done. Because we were younger, she made them virgin. A fifth of Bacardi rum stood stately next to the blender, a few swigs short of a full bottle. She poured herself a glass, leaving an inch or so to add the rum. Swirling the rum into the red mixture with a long, glass stirrer, she walked barefooted out onto the porch. The sun was starting to hide behind the rolling hills of San Luis Rey — the hills that formed what looked to be the body of a man, a sleeping Indian, they say. The faint glimmer of the ocean disappeared over the hills. Crosby, the golden retriever Sarah failingly taught for the seeing-eye dog program, shot through the door behind Pam. Then, Pam popped her head back in the door.

"Now there's rum next to the blender, girls. I'm out on the porch, so I won't know if you pour some in." Her auburn hair hung in front of her sun-tanned skin. A big goofy smile crossed her face. Laughing in staccato, she closed the patio door. Meanwhile, Sarah and I poured too much rum in our wine glasses of daiquiris. What I really remember, though, was that sensation in my temples; it really was buzzing. I felt loose. I felt like I could dance. I felt like I could drink more.

My mother raised my brother and me to fear alcohol. On many occasions, my mother said, in exasperation with my consistently rehabilitated uncle, "I wish you kids could get genetically tested for alcoholism, and then have it taken out. Because Lord knows you two have it." She would say this after dragging Jason and me in tight clenched hand-holds to the rehab center where my uncle, Steve, was a regular. I remember the green of the walls and the Parkinson's shake of his detoxified body. She would explain to us, "Your uncle drinks too much beer. It makes him sick in his mind and his body. You guys should never drink that stuff. Promise me, you won't, okay?" In our obvious cluelessness, we, of course, said we never would. My mom preached like Jonathan Edwards in "Sinners in the Hands of Angry God." Though she had no pulpit, she nearly infused the idea that drinking alcohol equated to eternal hellfire and damnation. Yet, I later found that her fear was rooted in the past — a lineage of disease-tainted blood. Her father was a drunk. Her brother was a drunk. Her first husband was a drunk — an abusive drunk at that.

Footsteps fumbling down the picture-strewn hallway, the stench of alcohol permeated our small house in Chandler, Arizona. As usual, my curly haired father grasped firmly in his large, leathery hands his best friend — a Coors light longneck bottle. His day of horseshoeing was over. He sat brooding in the blue wingback chair in the family room while my mother ran from kitchen to stove to refrigerator to kitchen table, putting the last minute meal preparations together. She made steak, baked potatoes, a Caesar salad, and homemade garlic bread. Six Coors, though, already lay empty in the sink, as his blood churned hot as curry. The danger zone. Awaiting any opportunity to lash out, his temper revved. His voice, a groggy mumble, turned caustic, ranting blame and accusation for what he thought was a dinner not made promptly or tasty enough.

Having been married for six months at this point, my mom sadly accepted this behavior as normal. She learned after the first three weeks of marriage when putting together a mattress frame that anything could anger him, setting him in a rage of physical abuse. Frail and weak in comparison, my mother, dressed in her red-flowered apron, cowered beneath my father's intimidating six foot two frame. Swinging unexpectedly, fingers balled into a fist, his thick hands raised . . . The burning sting. The scratches seeping blood. The tears trickling down bruised cheeks.

During high school, I drank. I drank like there was a run on the liquor stores. Actually, it was my senior year that I remember (or really, don't remember) most. Having moved from California to Kentucky in 1998, I spent my junior year unsuccessful in finding a group of friends. How-

ever, during my senior year, one Friday night in October, I walked down the narrow steps of a basement that was unfamiliar to me — a friend of a friend's house. There, I found the group (actually a group that I learned were my fellow classmates in the AP English program) that would lift me up into confidence after a dominating relationship that had left me passive and insecure. Unfortunately, the group also helped to feed my alcohol-hungry blood.

The twelve of us would drink Friday nights and Saturday nights at houses where parents were out of town, in the basements of naive, southern Baptists who had gone to bed early, and even under the dark, charcoal sky of Woodford County farms. We recovered on Sundays — some of us even braving church with hangovers — but we were always probing on Mondays, finding where and when the next party was. That year, my drink was vodka; I'd moved on from those days of daiquiris and rum. I'd mix it with orange juice, Sprite, Gatorade — anything to mask the overwhelming aroma of rubbing alcohol on skinned knees. I did learn to shoot it straight up, though. I can still imagine the long streak of burn down my throat and the quick shake of my head as I winced the smell away. I wasn't choosy with my alcohol either. The boys in the group — Jeff, Hawthorne, Will, Brandon, Aaron, and Keith — were farm-raised, Woodford County folk. If you hung with the boys, well, then it was bourbon: Jim Beam all the way.

After a few months of getting to know these guys, especially Will, whose constant outbursts in my Calculus class I had come to expect and love, I was invited to go camping with the boys. I went. Meeting Will on a less traveled street in town, I parked my Lexus inconspicuously in the lot of Big Springs Park. I was supposed to be spending the night with Jenny. My arms hugging my sleeping bag and pillow, I hoisted myself into his white, diesel, Ford truck with an uncomfortably high step. Driving about ten minutes into the Versailles countryside, the leafless trees ticking past us hurriedly, we reached the Riverfarm, Will's dad's winter-barren tobacco fields.

The boys stood around the campfire, pouring diesel fuel on the flames and giving manly approval at the billows of dark smoke. Jeff thrust a blue Igloo cooler full of straight Jim Beam in my cold, purple splotched hands. I drank it, trying not to wince. They rewarded me with pats on the back and phrases like, "Atta girl, Couch," and "Damn, that was pretty good for a girl." I was Couch to them, not Jessica. An impersonal title of fraternity, my last name confirmed that I was one of the guys.

In this new kind of friendship, I continued to drink — bourbon, beer, even a little vodka. Unfortunately, the time lapse of memory for that night lasts only about a half an hour. Of course, I still possess snapshot images of memory — snuggled up to Jeff, trying to stay warm in the cab of Hawthorne's truck, feeling sick and sitting outside the truck, slumped against the big tires, wishing I hadn't drank so much. However, I learned the true story of the night the next sunny morning

while swinging my legs off the bed of the truck — a missing left contact and an eaten Gala apple after the fact.

I had puked, puked so long and hard that Jeff had to be my nurse, holding back my thin blonde hair out of my spaghetti dinner. In my convulsing, probably from lack of fluid, he even had to dress me in my second shirt and my San Diego red sweatshirt. Then, in the middle of the night, I had passed out under the truck, curled up in the long spears of brown winter grass. Waking, I jerked my body quickly up, only to slam my head against the rusty tailpipe of Hawthorne's old truck. Passed out cold. Frightening even to me now, I had awakened oblivious. All I had remembered was matching each shot — being one of the guys and loving it. I remembered that feeling of happy grogginess.

My father's mother, Joyce, died in her usual state of inebriation. I never meet this woman. She died before I was born. Only in pictures have I seen this distant, yet so close relative. A brunette with curly shoulder-length hair, she was a diminutive little fairy next to my overweight, towering grandfather. Their life centered around social drinking — Wednesday nights of playing Bridge, parties on Friday nights, and late night toddies before bed. He was a longshoreman after college and it was on the frigid waters of the Eastern seaboard that he came to like the taste of Crown Royal. Actually, it was on one shore visit in a random city that he met and impregnated my grandmother. After receiving a call one August night about his baby on the way, my grandfather decided to go back to Morgantown, West Virginia and marry my grandmother. Theirs was a marriage of moral necessity. In his efforts to provide for his new bride and family, my grandfather became a professor at the University of West Virginia, and my grandmother became a housewife.

One night, in their small home, my grandfather came home from his Friday line of history classes. Untying his brown bow tie, he called through the den into the main part of house for my grandmother. She was in their floral wallpapered kitchen, stumbling from cooking sherry — the only alcohol she could find in

the house. My brother and his sister, Adrian, were at a cousin's house for the night.

"You're drunk again? Joyce, we have a party to go to," he yelled.

One of his colleagues at the university was being promoted. She informed him she wasn't going. Perturbed, my grandfather changed into a navy suit and paisley tie, closing the door in front of his drunk wife. He walked away from their small, brick cottage.

The next events are mere guesses — a piecing together of the scene that you could undoubtedly find in a police report. Turning the crystal knobs of the white, porcelain bathtub, my grandmother let the water fill the tub. No doubt, she tested the water's temperature by placing her small hands in the stream of water from the spout, her single solitaire wedding ring falling slightly to the left. Just right. She poured the Gardenia salts my grandfather bought her for mother's day into the water. Pulling off her black sequined dress, which she originally intended to wear to the party, she placed a wobbly right leg, followed by a staggering left, into the warm, relaxing tub — a tub so relaxing she fell asleep. In her state of unconsciousness, the water entered her nostrils and mouth, slowly trickling into her lungs. Four hours later, my grandfather wobbled into the house with Crown on his breath, and found my grandmother, at the age of forty-nine, dead in the bathtub. Drowned.

Now, I drink beer, Bud Light usually, preferably longneck bottles. Finally of the drinking age, sometimes I come home from a day of work and school, craving that barley taste. A twinge of fear pulses in my head, but I twist off the top of my beer anyway, taking one long smooth swallow, while I throw the top on the floor for my cat to play with. A contented sigh escapes my mouth. I think, this is college, right? Sometimes, I pull another Bud from the cardboard box, my large hands squeezing in my hurried tear from the first beer. On some nights, I even pull three or four, although mostly on weekends. Just like the stories of my family's blunders, I have my own. I've spent many nights buzzed, trashed, wasted, sloshed — however you want to call it.

I remember the weekend I spent up at Purdue with Will, Jeff, and Hawthorne. Killing four cases, a

bottle of cheap red wine, and a fifth of Captain Morgan's, we spent our days with weak stomachs and our nights with fearless attitudes. I remember Jose Cuervo night, the christening of my first apartment. My roommates and me licking salt off our hands, throwing back Kentucky shot glasses full of tequila, and frantically sucking the flesh of lime quarters, our minds floated in an intense slow buzz — a euphoria that would leave us grimacing in the morning.

I remember spending an embittered Valentine's Day alone in my apartment. Tugging at the edges of the label of the third and final Bud Light in the house, I decided to uncork the Asti sparkling wine. Pouring the bubbly tan liquid into the lead crystal goblets my mother gave me, I made a sarcastic toast to my best guy friend who will never date me. I drank the whole bottle. I remember taking shots with my brother this summer in the purple glow of a San Diego sunset. I remember bonging beers from my friend, Morgan's, bong made from putty and Lowe's materials. I can remember feeling the force of gravity pushing liquid to the back of my throat, requiring of me to swallow harder and faster. I can still feel the sting of my eyes and hear my loud belch. Of course, I can also remember not being able to remember.

I used to think that my grandmother drank rotten orange juice. Sitting at her kitchen table, she would watch "The Price is Right" and occasionally look down at her crossword puzzle, checking the word with a quick snap of her pencil and drawing a line through the appropriate letters. She was about seventy then. Gray-haired and wearing red lipstick, she was still getting dressed in normal clothes at that point. Smoking her Parliament 100s, she always drank orange juice in the morning. One day, sitting next to her, I reached for her tan, plastic cup of O.J. Taking a sip, I was startled by a taste that I couldn't describe — the taste of vodka. My grandmother had spiked her juice.

"Uck, Gram, why does your orange juice taste so gross?" I asked her.

Not realizing I had sampled her morning pick-me-up, her blue eyes widened. Nonchalantly, she put the cup to her creviced lips and said, "Let me test it." Making the face of a baby who's just tasted grapefruit for the first time, she then took the cup to the sink, pouring its contents down the drain. "What would I do without you, Jess?"

Later, I found her orange juice cups in odd places around the house: the sewing room cabinets, the spice cabinet in the kitchen, the hall's anything-and-everything cabinet. Then, as I got even older, I found bottles of Smirnoff vodka in the pantry and the linen closets. I still remember the day my mom searched through each cabinet in Grandma's house. Pulling bottles from places like the metal bread box and her cream, silk-lined hope chest in the master bedroom, empty and full, she took the bottles to the green and blue wallpapered kitchen and poured the clear liquid down the drain. She forced my grandma to watch.

My mom never liked that I drank Squirt soda as a child. As we walked down the pop aisle in the Safeway grocery store, she would always push for Sprite or Coke.

"Don't you want something different, Jess," she would ask, holding the alternative twelve-pack over the cart, ready to drop it in. I suppose she had too many bad memories of her own father. She says his drink was Old Crow, a straight whiskey, and Squirt soda. Sitting in his red and orange chair on the orange linoleum porch after a day of assembling electronic boards, he would sip his drink with bloodshot eyes glaring at his children behind black rimmed glasses. Bald and stoic, he looked like a strict Nazi — a nose and forehead passed down from German ancestors.

He was the most functional of the drunks in our family. Despite his nightly drinking, he was successful, always providing a life of comfort for his family. In fact, some of his electronic boards made it into the first American space shuttle. Wearing his self-made watch (the face open so you could see all the technical electronic work), he was featured in *Who's Who* for his accomplishments. Who he was during the day and who he was at night, though, were two different people. After a few small glasses, he'd grow argumentative about the cleanliness of the house or the noise level of the children — anything to escape the Krueger household. In fact, he escaped a lot and for long periods of time. He would drink one night and be away for five or six days at a time, visiting places like Las Vegas and Los Angeles, always toting gifts in his brown leather suitcase as consolation for his behavior. My mom always remembers one thing about him. She would try to make him deals.

"Daddy, if you don't ever drink again, I will never forget to clean my room."

"Daddy, if you don't ever drink again, I will never fight with Steve again."

"Daddy, if you don't ever drink again . . ."

Two years ago in November, my mother and I sat down together with a dark blue bottle of a German Riesling. Carefully taking two crystal glasses with green gems on the stems from the cabinet, she poured a glass for herself and then one for me. I remember looking at the little bubbles trickling up to the surface of the wine from the bottom of the glass. My mom's green eyes stared at me. Rubbing the dress pants on my right knee, I questioned her motives. With my every swallow, she watched. Seeming to calculate the speed at which I picked up the glass for another sip, she plotted her inquisition.

"Do you drink, Jessica," she asked.

"Well," I stuttered. "Well . . . yeah, yes, I do."

"Oh God, Jessica! You know you can't do that. Haven't you ever listened to me? Look at our family. How can you be so stupid?" She spread guilt over me like butter on bread. I shrugged, silent. No answer would suffice anyway.

She checks my fridge when she comes over to my apartment. Opening the door, she'll usually see a sixer in the back behind the milk and eggs. Shaking her head in disapproval, she'll close the door. She's stopped asking a lot of questions lately. You could say that we've come to a silent recognition of the facts. She affords me the measure of adulthood. However, there is one very pertinent condition. If I become an alcoholic, she will disown me. No questions. No second chances. "I've had all the drunks and hurt in my life already. No more," she once told me.

Toward the end of his life, my grandfather drank gin and vodka; he heard somewhere that you could smell the alcohol less on your breath. The truth is that he could never keep his promises with his sweet little girl. Refusing to give up his gin on the rocks, he died an active alcoholic with liver cirrhosis at the age of fifty-six. Five months ago, my uncle, Steve, died a Budweiser drinker with liver cirrhosis at the age of fifty-four. The only thing I remember of him is the time I visited my cousin at his house to play Legos. Eating Cheese Puffs and piecing together the helicopter Lego layout, my Uncle Steve collapsed to the kitchen floor. Our six year old legs ran to the kitchen, only to see red on the creme Corian counter and the tan tiled floor. Blood soaked his red and blue checkered shirt that reeked of pig manure from the family pork farm he occasionally worked at. This was one of his first liver failures — the first sign being uncontrollable nosebleeds that look like a pig at slaughter. He stuffed paper towels up his nose and grabbed his beer that waited on the counter.

I know that I have a weakness: a too quickly convinced hand into the refrigerator. I also know that the end result of my decision will inevitably be death. I think about my family every time I drink. Whether through naiveté or stupidity, I choose to live on a very small ledge — a plateau of normal college drinking and the vertical drop of alcoholism. It's a serious gamble with death as the high stakes and poker chips of years to lose as the determinant. I'm a high roller, like my grandfather on his sudden trips to Las Vegas. Rolling the dice and throwing a few chips into the game, I take my chances and tip my bottled beer up.